TWO NATURE STUDIES

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CHAPTER I

Statement of Intention

The purpose of this paper is to present my concepts of painting from nature, with examples from my series on birds and reptiles. I will indicate how each composition was derived, according to the demands of the model in nature, as well as cite historical examples which influenced their execution.

The paintings in the Bird series (plate 1) were concerned with depicting birds in a situation that would speak of their unique character. I wanted to paint an essence or permanent quality of birds in flight as opposed to the general appearance or what Leonardo called the "accidental" appearance in nature.[1] The series objective was to render instinct responding to stimuli at the expanse of anatomical completeness. The "flight" was a universal one of all birds capable of instinctive flight. The stimuli I had in mind was not specific: it could be something as obvious as fear or as complex as migratory instincts. To paint this abstract quality a concentration of the parts, chosen from the universal bird kingdom would be required. The models for these paintings were obtained from a variety of biological and field guide books.

The universality of the flight was suggested by the variety of bird forms and species used in the picture. This was achieved by overlaping and cropping the figures to

fit a larger number into the design. The birds were presented frontally in a structured format (discussed in the next chapter). Reading the disembodied parts provided only limited information about the painting: such as local kinds of space and movements. The viewer was instead encouraged to first take in the entire scene, the one image, allowing the essence of the bird's character to become visible. Also by only using pieces I was able to attain an explosive effect in keeping with the action of the birds.

My idea for the Reptile series came from paging through books on snakes and lizards. I found I became anxious about turning to the next page to confront a new set of "creatures". While at one time these animals called for caution, their pleasing patterns asked for a closer look. This duality of inspection and respect seemed to be peculiar to many reptiles--especially snakes.* In nature, the patterning was subservient to the physical presence of the thing, in the mind of the viewer, so that caution exceeded delight. I attempted to emphasize the aesthetics of the object in my work, by translating the patterns into purer pictorial interests. As the designs were extracted from naturalistic models a certain amount of the animal's sinister side would be maintained.

*The respect the snake demands is tied to both real and imagined fears; as some are venomously dangerous a certain amount of caution is granted all species; other fears such as phobias are tied to psychology.

CHAPTER II

Bird Series

The design principle used to formulate both Bird paintings (numbers 1 and 2) comes from the synthetic order founded and developed in Italy during the High Renaissance. With this procedure the figures are presented in a geometric arrangement which influences the way the viewer sees the picture. An early historic example is Leonardo's Adoration (plate 2): "The figures of the picture are disposed, around the central image of the Virgin, in an instantly sensible, containing geometric pattern. This pattern is composed of two interlocking shapes: The broad-based triangle made between the Madonna and the foremost older men, and the semi-circle that embraces all the rest ... The triangle has the affect of an unshakable solidity of shape, but a solidarity that contains and controls the implication of a movement: above its base upper sides converge in equal and balancing directions on each other. The shape of the semi-circle, oppositely, first implies movement, which then is contained by the disciplinary clarity and symmetry of the form".[2] The premise here is that certain geometric configurations are better suited for specific interests: the triangle for solidarity, the semi-circle for contained movement and the ellipse for self-containment. As my painting wished to depict bird forms in a frontal, multi-directional spirit I

chose a geometric framework with a number of lines radiating from the central portion of the picture. Instead of a self-contained geometric pattern I had one which continued to move off the picture surface. This synthesis invited an all-over, on-going kind of viewing.

Within the geometric framework I also wanted a situation revealing disorder which would transmit the frenzied state of the birds. In those spaces not touched by construction lines I deliberately placed forms countering those in the structure. This system of rhythms and counter-rhythms created a very activated surface. Through order I achieved a certain amount of disorder.

An alternative technique for achieving disorder would be to drop cut-out forms in a chance Arpian method onto the picture surface.[3] The difficulty with this procedure is that the cut-out pieces might congregate uncontrollably in some areas leaving others sparse denying the even concentrated surface I desired. Further, because birds are subject to the laws of flight--they have to fly right side up--chance dropping could not be used.

Spatial design originates in the two, large, central wings. They are extracted from the same bird, with wings superiorly lifted, and therefore relate to one another. The larger, more central wing, remains relatively flat parallel to the picture plane. It's counterpart, maintaining anatomic verisimilitude, moves off the panel in an almost right-angled

direction. It is this relationship which directs activity on the picture plane: the oblique wing leads from an exterior space onto the picture plane and establishes itself next to the larger wing which assumes a planar arrangement parallel to the picture. The bulk of the remaining design is then built up on this single plane.

The advantage of a planar configuration is that it allows the content to be presented in the most direct manner: with movements taking place on a single plane the action is more easily read and its effects felt. The classical precedent for arranging figures along a single plane had been found in antique sarcophagi. Poussin's early children's Bacchanals are based upon the "bas-relief pattern of Roman sarcophagi."[4] The material limits, for suggesting pictorial illusionism, along with the lengthy format of the coffin made the single plane desirable for presenting a believable narrative.

While the composition remains frontal, on the whole, various kinds of space are activated by individual figures. A foreshortened harlequin duck grows out of a mallard suggesting sinking space in the middle of the picture; fanned wings indicate rotary motion. Space is allowed to continue off the picture by the various forms which become cut-off by the perimeter of the panels. However, most of the space that is created comes from the simple juxtaposition and overlapping of forms. These "spaces" are only read after the larger pattern has made its impression--which comes the instant the viewer sees the picture.

The corners of the first study (Birds #1) are used to suggest bird-forms entering and leaving the scene.* A grouse rests firmly in the bottom right corner; opposite, a fan of tail feathers is shown totally free of the bounds of the rectangle. The upper two corners represent states between these two extremes. Matisse, in his "Notes d'un Peintre", explains the value of this procedure: "'movement, taken at a particular moment, has meaning only if we do not isolate it either from the proceeding or following impression'".[5] While bird forms occupy all regions of the painting I did increase the number in the lower areas. This bottom congestion symbolizes the current dominance of gravitational pull over flight freedom. Horizontal figures, in the lower positions, stress the earthly "weight" while vertical poses suggest freedom in the upper regions. The exploding outward movements of the larger design are restated in the upper, left corner. Here a starburst of tails and wings mimic the action of the overall scheme. On the right a "step-ladder" configuration leads to three wings presented in a "pin-wheel" arrangement. This latter design alludes to the spinning, centrifugal movement sensed in the picture.

In the second painting (plate 1) I abandoned the rectangle in favor of a square format. It's "non-directional"[6] character was better suited for portraying the explosive action

*The second version (plate 1) has only those design principles found in the bottom square of the earlier rectangle.

of the design. To add to the compactness and consequent drama of the scene I added figures to what was the bottom square of the first painting. The larger size (8 feet by 8 feet) demanded a new perspective from the viewer. The "hand-held size" of the earlier easel picture represented a view in the distance. The larger version occupied space similar to that which the viewer moved around in--the painting became an environment.

Having established most of the design principles in the first painting the preoccupation of the second would be color. I rejected oil paints for acrylics because they offered a more impersonal, plastic quality not found in the "earthly" oils. Also, the plywood panels of the larger work provided a more rigid surface causing the hard-edge forms to "jump" around more than on the absorbent canvas.[7]

I used color in the second painting to add lightness to the flight. The natural "earth" colors were replaced by a harmony of primary and secondary colors and their variations. The lack of color verisimilitude gave the forms a new, plastic quality which tended to remove them from naturalistic comparison towards the synthetic design. Yet, the most obvious benefit was the lightness these richer colors expressed. The debt to Matisse was obvious: "'I have always wanted my work to have the lightness and gaiety of spring which never lets one suspect the labour it has cost'".[8]

Details were abandoned for larger shapes which readily translated into flat color areas. These flat, unmodeled patches promoted the directness of the pattern. I introduced small segments or slivers of black over the entire surface to increase color intensity in the painting. Alberti in his treatise on painting illustrated the value of comparison: "Ivory and silver are white, which, when placed near swan's down, seem pale. For this reason things seem very bright in painting when there is a good proportion of white and black as there is from lightened to shadowy in the objects themselves; thus all things are known by comparison".[9]

Juxtaposed forms of equal color intensity have the effect of buoying up the birds creating a lightness denying gravitational pull. Color is also used to create tension in the work. The Canada goose is buoyed up by its colorful yellow, upper body and orange wing area; its head, being almost black, stops the upward advancement. Consequently, the bird appears to hover while it waits for a clear path to freedom. In the same corner a Frigate bird assumes a freer position with its wings extended (the upper one cut off by the top of the panel). To compensate for the large, single color-areas of the bird I gave the small "saw-tooth" feathers, at the rear of the wing, greater intensity. These pink and yellow wedges almost "fly" off the bird demanding a certain amount of attention comparable with the large silhouette.

To contrast to the motion generated by the figures I chose to render the "background" in a single shade of light

blue. I found these "grounds" created a kind of atmospheric perspective, according to their variety of size and particular surroundings. The blue took on a greater density in the smaller sections enclosed by forms on all sides. The larger areas, extending off the painting, appeared lighter--less dense.

Although my palette was somewhat limited, color-usage remained relatively intuitive. I chose colors for specific shapes and derived neighbouring colors intuitively from these. Matisse, the master of this method, described his procedure: "'I put down my tones without preconceived ideas. If at first and without perhaps my knowing it, a tone has delighted or struck me, I usually find when I have finished my picture that I have respected that tone, whereas I have gradually modified and transformed all the others. The expressive qualities of colors impress me instinctively'".[10] Of course my method was not totally intuitive color-wise because I had already limited my choice to non-earth colors. Similarily, my figures, while deriving their local positioning from each other, were based on a grander design of synthetic order. It was this mixture of allowing instincts to operate within a preconceived skeleton that characterized my work in Birds #2.

Birds #2

3. LEONARDO *Adoration of the Magi*, Florence, Uffizi

Adoration of the Magi

CHAPTER III

Reptile Series

The shape and content of each painting in the Reptile series was derived from an isolated section of a model in nature.* Usually the stretcher shape conveyed some hint of movement (frontal, lateral, speedy) characteristic of the living source. The patterning was schematized and stylized and presented in an aesthetically pleasing manner. Color remained related to the model in nature although it became purified in the paintings. All the works were made larger than the models interpreted and all have the deep stretchers (2 1/2 inches) pioneered by Frank Stella.[11] I liked them because they seemed to balance the frontal, pictorial quality of the painting with an object-like presence that hinted at their volumetric source.

Like Stella's monochrome paintings these works are directed towards the wholistic--"the one image".[12] Rubin explains the difference between Stella's early paintings and the European geometric painters: "Those subtle adjustments which gave pictures a 'relational' aspect continued to be incorporated. Moreover, though no longer figurative, such pictures still invite the left-to-right scanning that has prevailed in most Western art, and which is rooted in narrative exposition".[13] The units in Stella's paintings, taken

*The models I used were adopted from various guide books on reptiles.

separately, add little to what the work is about: one must take in the whole surface as a pulsating field before the proper effect is felt. My paintings, because they are derived from animals who operate along a single path maintain a lateral quality while striving for the single image.

While Stella's "'regulated pattern... forces illusionistic space out at a constant rate'",[14] my patterning increases illusionistic space. Diamondback illustrates this point. As my painting is an extraction from an object its space is more properly spoken of as form. The painting's trapezoidal shape (top-6 feet/bottom-8 feet) simulates a bend in the snake whereby the greatest compression takes place at the top allowing the base to bellow out. Visually the work presents itself frontally with lateral recession indicated. The bending sensation is further developed by having the modular units curve outward and downward in response to the uneven pressures. The effect is one of organic cylindricality. Other features, which increase the "serpentness" of the work are its color scheme and characteristic "V" shaped bands.

The pictorial interests which reduce the "snake-image" of the painting are its size, modular units, purity of color and their visual relationships. Diamondback's large size prevents it from being mistaken for a real-like snake. The even patterning, adds to the flatness and consequent frontality of the work. The pure, even coloring also helps

to remove the art from the real-life situation. The arrangement of black diamonds next to white ones tends to enhance the dark/light qualities of these "colors" respectively. True color is only seen in the field of yellow diamonds surrounding the central motif; by being an isolated color the yellow is able to draw attention to it's peculiar colorfulness.

Scarlet King, another painting in the series, was a more ambitious work in that it had to structurally repeat the lengthy anatomy of the snake. The painting attempted to portray a model whose sequentially colored bands were its dominant characteristic. Its yellow/black/red/black banding could only be appreciated if allowed to repeat itself enough times, within a narrow format, to establish a rhythm. It therefore had to be quite long (1 1/2 feet by 9 feet). The difficulty with this great length was that it invited a side to side reading rather than a wholistic presentation. The repeated vertical bands helped to counter some of the lateral movement. A certain amount of the visual scanning was also checked by the particular geometric grid used to separate the diamonds. Each row of concentric arcs increased their verticality as they approached the opposite end of the canvas causing the diamonds in the bottom central region to become elongated. This central cylindrical compression tended to draw the focusing-eye inward distracting from the painting's length.

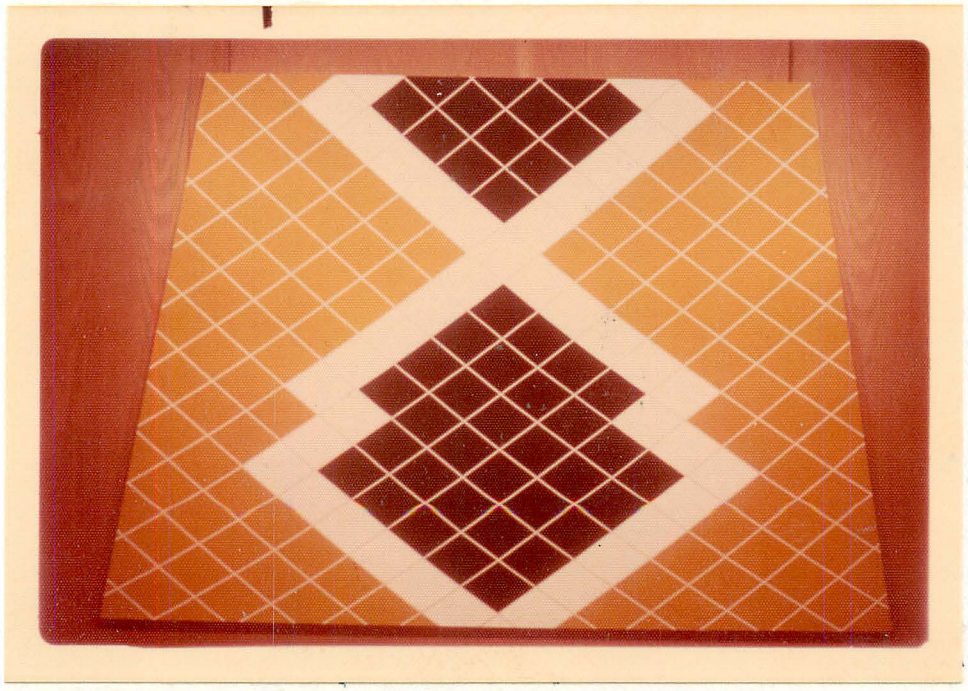
The inherent quality that shaped Garter was the "fleet narrowness" seen in the natural object. The painting consisted of four individual panels which were hung vertically. The vertical arrangement seemed to lack the weighty burden of horizontal grouping. The schematized dorsal "tracks" were all of the same design but occupied the panels in varied positions vertically. This staggered pattern tended to agitate the surface as the eye moved from panel to panel. Lastly, movement was further suggested by the stripes which ran the length of the canvas repeating the "zip" of the panel.

The rattlesnake offered abundant material for pictorial patterning. The interlocking "spearheads" and diamond shapes provided a bold pattern capable of suggesting movement--the rigidity of the upper group contrasted to the casuality of the larger diamonds below. The reflective silver and dusty brown coloring helped to preserve some of the local color of the rattlesnake's desert environment.

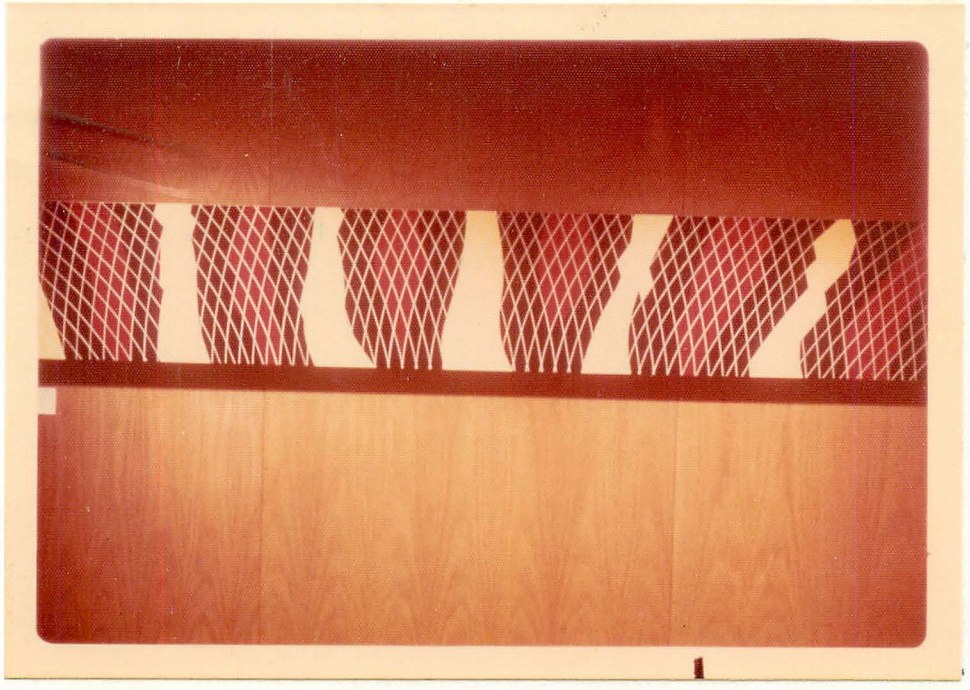
Yellow Rat, a zig-zag structure, maintains a flatness suggesting a rhythmic, lateral movement. Again the layered striping echoes the peculiar movement of the painting.

Speckled King, represented the termination of this particular series on reptiles. It perhaps was the painting which went the furthest to deny naturalistic roots for purer pictorial interests. Its large size approached the non-directional attitude of the square. I intentionally left it a rectangle to maintain some vestige of serpent tubularity.

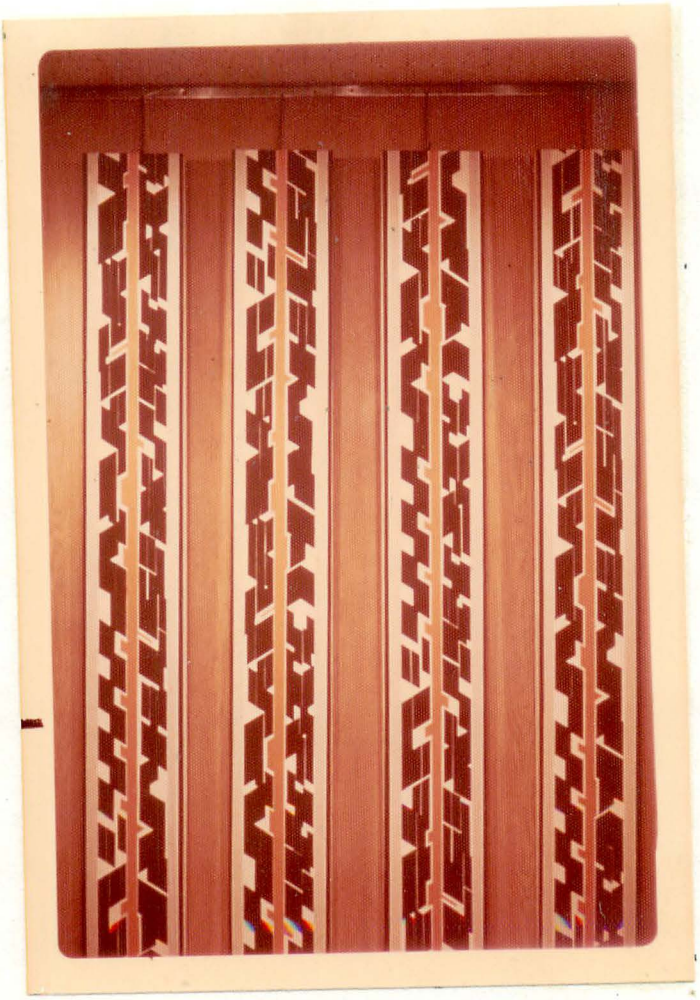
The regular field of diamonds promoted the single image characteristic of a number of optical works. Ehrenzweig in his perception study "The Hidden Order of Art" described the nature of optical painting: "'Like serialization in music, optical painting is a case of intellect destroying its own modes of functioning. The single elements of optical composition are serialized in so smooth a gradation that the eye fails to pick out any stable 'Gestalt' pattern ... Our vision is conditioned to give up focusing and to take the entire plane as a totality'".[15] Such was the case with Speckled King. After one acknowledged the canvas size and shape as well as the characteristic flow of the diamonds the eye became tired of looking for unit relationships and accepted the picture as one image. This single image offered qualities which were better sensed as opposed to read as in figure-ground relationships.



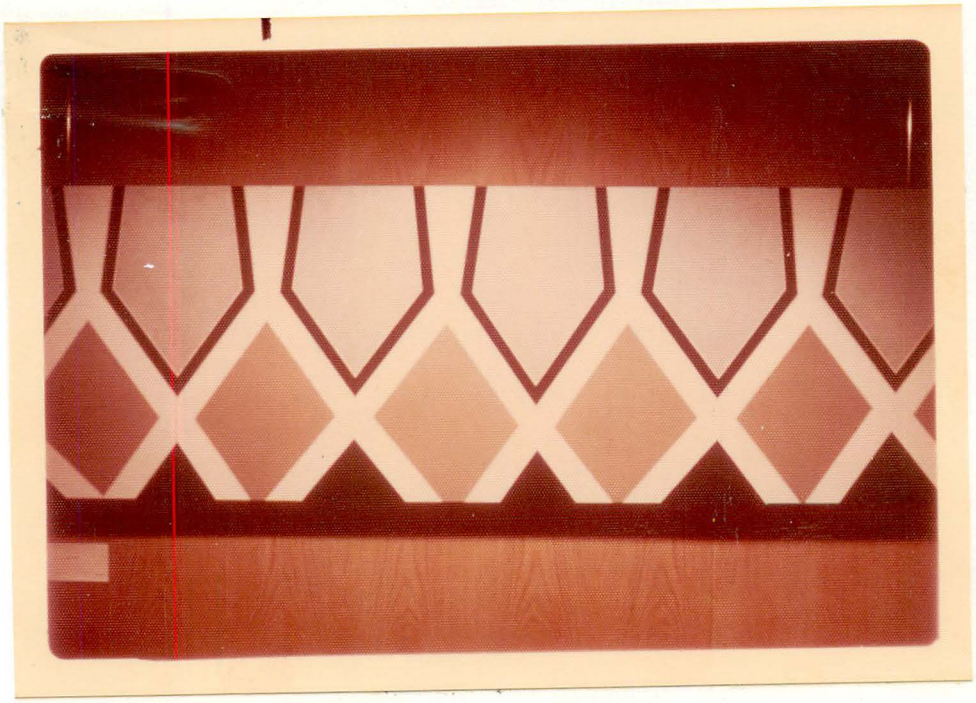
Diamondback



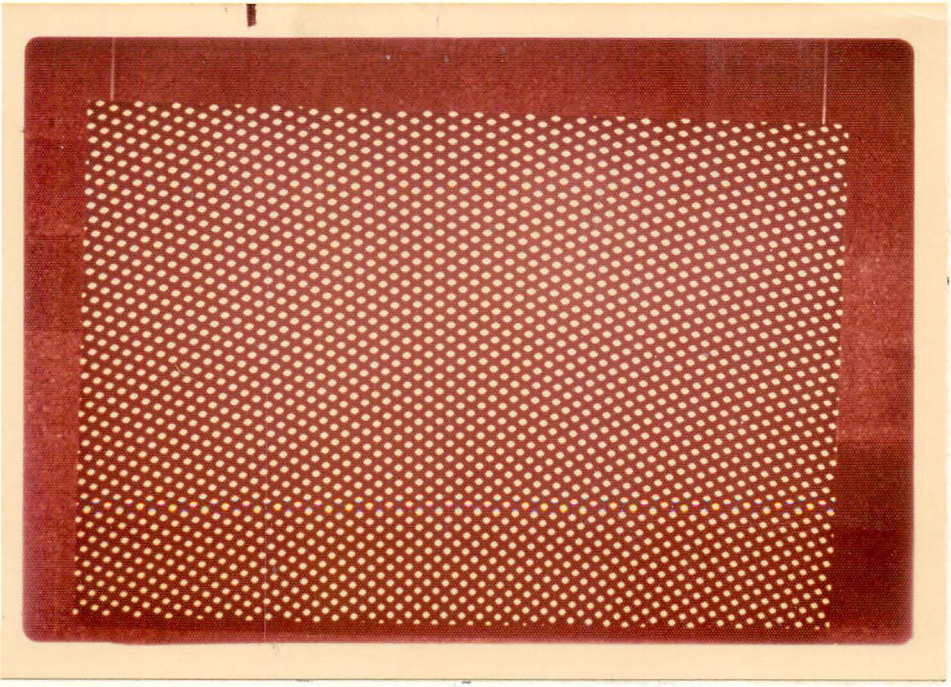
Scarlet King



Garter



Rattler



Speckled King

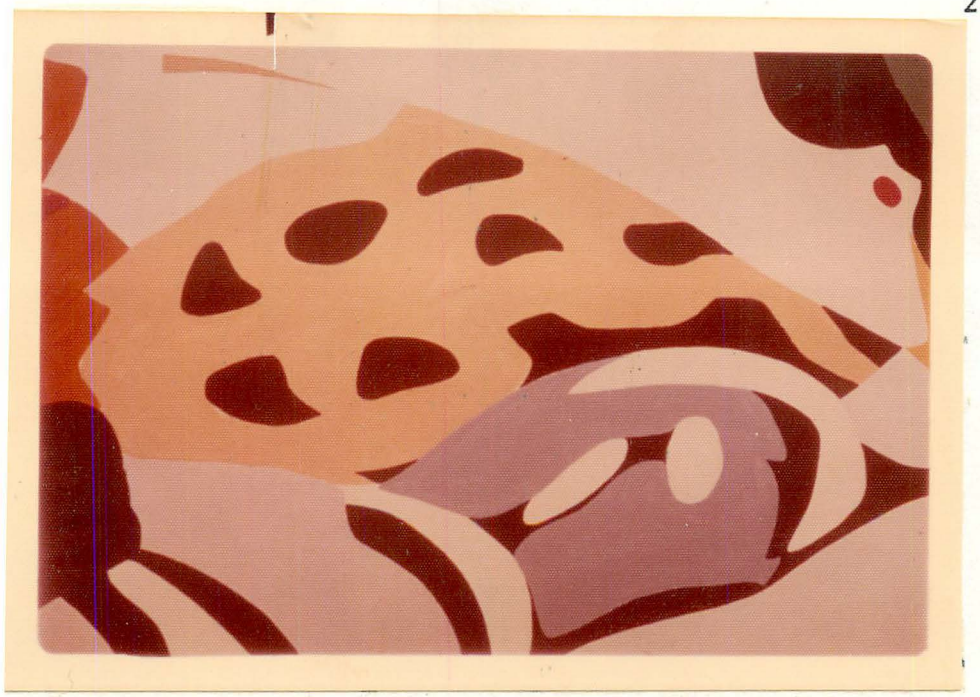
CHAPTER IV

Comparing the Series

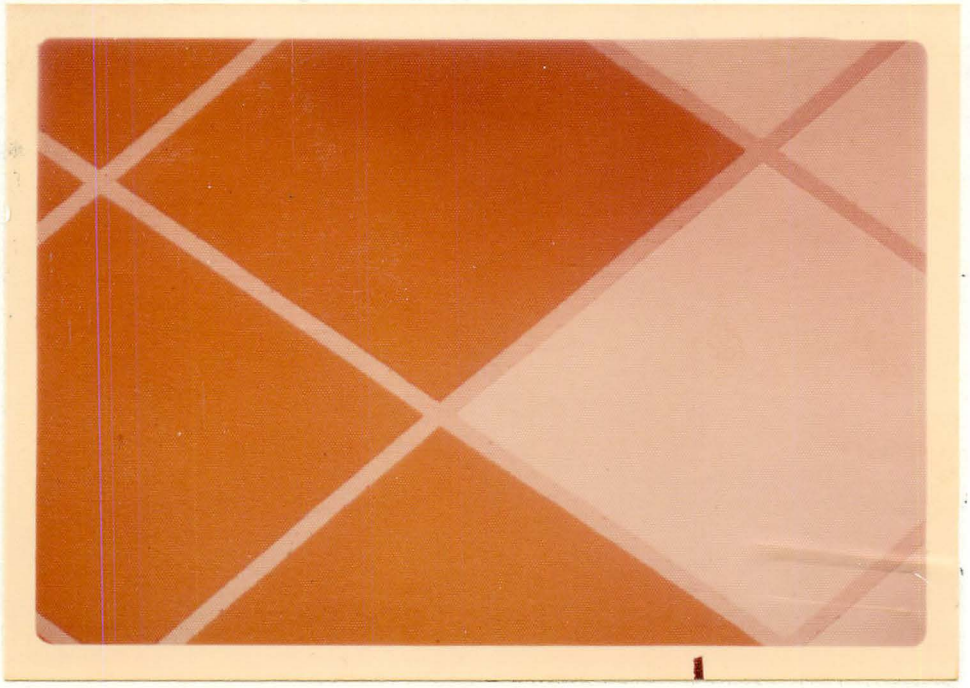
The most obvious difference between the two series was the manner in which they were executed. The Bird design was developed from a concentration of the parts while the individual Reptile paintings represented an extraction from a natural model. The two approaches can be compared in terms of European and American influences. The Reptile paintings, for the most part, possessed the "overallness" of Jackson Pollock's abstract expressionism.[16] The Bird series, on the other hand, was still in the European tradition of figure-ground relationships: the parts, while designed for a single impression, individually added to the drama. The reptile surface sought an even encompassing kind of vision that mainly discouraged reading the parts. The first group employed the hard-edge style related to such European painters as Matisse (plate 8). Many of the Reptile works left areas of raw canvas between the "scales" (plates 9 and 10). These "breathing spaces"[17] not only separated the various units but softened the edge contacts keeping the paintings from becoming too hard-edged and mechanical.[18]

Although the Bird paintings were structured and maintained a limited palette, their execution allowed for a certain number of intuitive choices. With the Reptile series the final results could only be seen after the tape had been

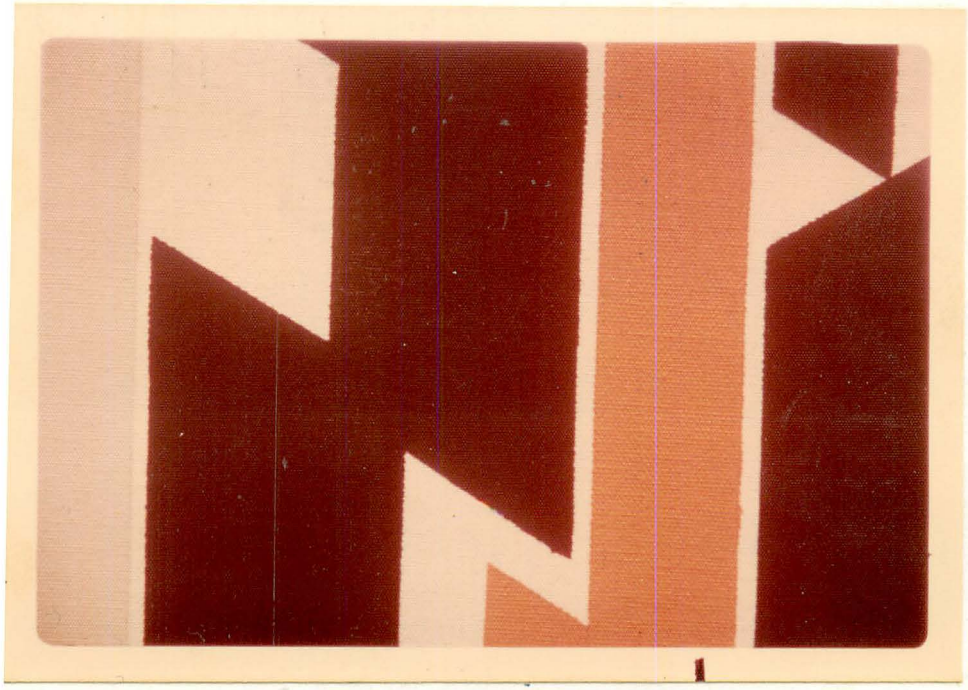
removed--all the decisions had to be made beforehand. Lastly, the animals themselves helped to determine the procedure used to interpret them. It was their inherent characteristics which helped determine the methods used for expression. Figure-ground relationships were suitable for showing birds in flight while the single image told of the reptile character.



Detail of Birds #2



Detail of Diamondback



Detail of Garter

FOOTNOTES

Chapter I Statement of Intention

1. Ludwig H. Heydenreich, Leonardo da Vinci, vol. 1, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1954, p. 104.

Chapter II Bird Series

2. S. J. Freedberg, Painting of the High Renaissance in Rome and Florence, vol. 1, Harper and Row, Publishers, New York, 1972, p. 7.

3. H. W. Jansen, History of Art, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 1969, p. 534.

4. Anthony Blunt, Nicolas Poussin, vol. 1, Published by the Bollingen Foundation, New York, 1967, p. 221.

5. Alexander Romm, Henri Matisse, Printed by Printshop 21, Ivan Fedoroff, Leningrad, p. 28.

6. Lawrence Alloway, "Systematic Painting", in Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology, ed., Gregory Battcock, E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., New York, 1968, p. 55.

7. William S. Rubin, Frank Stella, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970, p. 118.

8. Louis Aragon, Henri Matisse, vol. II, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., New York, p. 284.

9. Leone Battista Alverti, "On Painting", in Literary Sources of Art History, E. G. Holt, ed., Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1947, p. 112.

10. Raymond Escholier, Matisse, Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, New York, 1960, p. 82.

Chapter III Reptile Series

11. Rubin, op. cit., p. 15.

12. Rubin, op. cit., p. 10.

13. Rubin, op. cit., p. 24.

14. Rubin, op. cit., p. 25.

15. Maurice de Sausmarez, Bridget Riley, New York Graphic Society Ltd., Greenwich, Connecticut, 1970, p. 31.

Chapter IV Comparing the Series

16. Rubin, op. cit., p. 28.

17. Rubin, op. cit., p. 16.

18. Rubin, op. cit., p. 118.

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